



The logo for "The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology". The title is written in a serif font, with "The Handbook of" in a smaller, italicized script above "HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY" in a large, bold, all-caps serif font. The background is a dark blue gradient.

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## **Humanistic Psychology and Women: A Critical-Historical Perspective**

**By Ilene Serlin & Eleanor Criswell**

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### **Humanistic Psychology and Women: A Critical-Historical Perspective**

The role of women in humanistic psychology is a complex one. On the one hand, much of humanistic thought, especially in regard to the centrality of personal experience and holistic and tacit ways of knowing (Polanyi, 1958), has much in common with feminist theories of intersubjectivity (Jordan, 1991; Chodorow, 1978), personal knowledge, and the importance of finding one's own voice (Heilbrun, 1988; Gilligan, 1982; Woolf, 1989). On the other hand, existential, humanistic and transpersonal psychologies have all been subject to feminist critiques that these perspectives privilege the sole self-evolving individual on a solitary and heroic journey of self-discovery (Wright, 1995; Crocker, 1999). This journey is characterized by subduing nature, overcoming matter, transcending the body (Wilbur, 1986), promoting individuation, differentiation, and abstraction, and is filled with masculine terms of agency, control, and self-sufficiency (Crocker, 1999). Humanistic psychology, these critics charged, had forgotten the body and nature (Wright, 1995; Starhawk, 1988). In fact, existential humanism was based on the experience of the modern, alienated, urban white European male (Roszak, 1992), which left out relevant experiences of women, children and indigenous peoples. Even the postmodern trend in humanistic psychology can also be critiqued as sharing "modernity's groundlessness" (Weil, 1999), being disembodied, and lacking a sense of place and body. A truly radical feminist postmodernist humanistic psychology, therefore, would have to be grounded in an "ecosocial matrix" (Spretnak, 1997) which restored elements of earth, body and community. Finally, a feminist perspective on humanistic psychology can itself be critiqued as being insensitive to issues of power and social context. "Womanist" philosophy extends the themes of feminist psychology by focusing on the centrality of community, mutual caring, and family, and it challenges us to move beyond experience to liberation and transformation (Leslie, 1999; Jacklin, 1987). Although these criticisms

are true for only part of humanistic psychology, as challenges they are important reminders for the field.

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

While the 'third force' or humanistic orientation to psychology was fathered by such men as Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Rollo May, Sidney Jourard, and others, many women served as the mothers of humanistic psychology. Humanistic psychologists believed that all human beings are basically creative and behave with intentionality and values. Their focus was on the experiencing person and the meaning of experience to the person; they emphasized the human qualities of choice, and self-realization; they were concerned with problems that are meaningful to humans; and their ultimate concern was with the dignity and worth of humans and an interest in the development of the potential inherent in every person (Krippner & Murphy, Fall, 1973). During the late 1960s and 1970s, many women were attracted to humanistic psychology because of its philosophy, practices, and promises of self-fulfillment.

At approximately the same time, parallel social movements were beginning. For example, in the late 1950s the women's liberation movement led by Betty Freidan championed similar humanistic principles and rights. The world of humanistic psychology was a favorable environment for women. Many women attended workshops in growth centers throughout the country, which continue to be characterized by a great deal of exploration, experimentation, and creativity. The Humanistic Psychology Institute (now Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center) was founded by Eleanor Criswell from the Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) in 1970 as its academic arm, as a place for training humanistic psychologists, both men and women.

The humanistic psychology movement and the human potential movement were not identical, but were mutually supportive. Many women answered the call to human potential events. Their spirit of coming closer with others, the hallmark of women's ways of being and knowing, was therefore significant in the zeitgeist of humanistic psychology.

In the 1970s the second contemporary wave of the women's movement came in, led by Gloria Steinem and others. Women in AHP began to assert their feelings about not having enough of a voice, and were encouraged to move into leadership positions in the organization and were given more program time devoted to women's issues. Up to 1976 there were three women AHP presidents: Charlotte Buhler, Norma Lyman (the first organizational secretary of AHP), and Eleanor Criswell, in contrast to the 11 male presidents. After 1976, there were 13 female presidents and 12 male presidents. Twice there were male and female co-presidents. Women presidents after 1976 include: Jean Houston, Jacqueline L. Doyle, Virginia Satir, Peggy Taylor, Lonnie Barbach, Frances Vaughan, Elizabeth Campbell, Maureen O'Hara, Sandy Friedman, Ann Weiser Cornell, MA Bjarkman, Jocelyn Olivier, and Katy Brant. The AHP conventions were always highly experiential, and featured women's issues, community issues, relationship concerns, somatic practices, and environmental concerns.

Both inside and outside AHP and APA, there have been other outstanding women humanistic psychologists and therapists. For example, Laura Perls, who with Fritz Perls "brought individual responsibility into an active experiential process" (Serlin, 1992) and Virginia Satir, founder of conjoint family therapy, were both well-known in their day. Stella Resnick, Ilana Rubenfeld, and Natalie Rogers were active in AHP conventions. Charlotte Buhler, a personality theorist, met with the others at Old Saybrook, Connecticut (November, 1964), a seminal gathering for the founding of the humanistic psychology field. Carol Guinn was the long-time editor of *The AHP Newsletter*, an important voice in the field. Some women were active in their humanistic institutions of higher education, such as Anne Richards (State University of West Georgia), Nina Menrath, Norma Lyman, and Eleanor Criswell (Sonoma State University). There have been many unsung women in humanistic psychology. Some of them are the wives of the founding fathers Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Sidney Jourard; for example, Helen Rogers, Bertha Maslow, and Antoinette Jourard. It is interesting that they are/were all artists. Helen Rogers was a painter; Bertha Maslow was a sculptor; and Antoinette (Toni) Jourard is a photographer. All were deeply self-actualizing persons, who were fully functioning, and inspiring to their husbands and to others.

While the leadership of AHP had many women, the leadership of Division 32 (Humanistic Psychology) of the American Psychological Association (APA) did not. Division 32 was founded to bring humanistic psychology specifically into academic and professional psychology organizations: "The perspective of humanistic psychology was officially born in APA with the establishment of Division 32 [Humanistic Psychology] in 1971. Its credo was to apply 'the concepts, theories and philosophy of humanistic psychology to research, education, and professional applications of scientific psychology,' and to ensure 'that humanistically oriented ideas and activities operate within APA and some of its divisions'"(AHP, December 1971; Summer 1972; February 1973) (Serlin, 1998). A number of women participated in the founding of Division 32. Joyce Howard, Louise Riscalla, and Constance Moerman, for example, attended the founding meeting of Division 32 and Gloria Gottsegen was named its Acting Secretary. During the first Division 32 election, Elizabeth Mintz, Joen Fagen, and Janette Rainwater were elected members-at-large of the Executive Board. Karen Goodman and Marta Vargo helped run the Hospitality Suite during the APA conventions, which started the general APA tradition that hospitality suites host the more experiential programs at APA. Zaraleya was named newsletter editor, and Nora Weckler, a California psychologist, was also active in the governance of Division 32. Past-Presidents include Gloria Gottsegen and Mary Jo Meadow. Contemporary women humanistic psychologists active in the division are Eleanor Criswell, (President), (Sonoma State University), Constance Fischer (President-elect), (Duquesne University), Ilene Serlin (Past-president and APA Council Representative), (Saybrook Graduate School faculty member), Ruth Heber (Past-president), Mary Anne Siderits (Newsletter editor), (Marquette University), Maureen O'Hara (Member-at-large), (President of Saybrook Graduate School), and others. Despite the involvement of women members, however, the leadership has been predominantly male. Compared to 38.5 per cent women among all members of APA, Division 32 is close to average with 30.1 per cent female membership. Statistics on the percentage of women officers in divisions, however, shows Division 32 to have only 16.6 per cent

women officers, as compared with 42.8 per cent women officers of the division of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology (24), 46.6 per cent in the division of Psychotherapy (29), 33.3 per cent in the Psychology of Religion division (36), and 38.8 per cent in the division of Psychoanalysis (39) (APA, 1999). That trend may be changing with four women elected president in recent years: Ruth Heber (1993-1994), Ilene Serlin (1996-1997), Eleanor Criswell (1999-2000), and Constance Fischer (2000-2001).

## **WOMEN'S WAYS OF KNOWING AND HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY**

In a recent sequel to the now well-known *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenki et. al, 1986), this same group of women extended their epistemological analysis to Knowledge, Difference and Power (Goldberger et. al, 1996). The position that they lay out echoes core values of humanistic psychology (p. 205).

In their opening chapter to *Knowledge, Difference and Power*, Goldberger et. al framed their argument with a statement that the discussion would be in terms of gender roles and the archetypally feminine, not in terms of real, complex women and men. In the same way, the distinctions we make here about women's versus men's ways of knowing, and experiential versus cognitive approaches to humanistic psychology, are simply helpful conceptual tools. Since society has always "genderized" knowledge, understanding women's ways of knowing can raise our consciousness to include "the situational and cultural determinants of knowing" and "the relationship between power and knowledge" (p. 8), "standpoint epistemologies" (Jaggar, 1983; Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 1986, 1991) and "social positionality and situated knowledge" (hooks, 1983; De Laurentis, 1986; Collins, 1990; Haraway, 1991).

The key concepts, therefore, of those women's ways of knowing are:

- 1) Connectedness. In contrast to the separate, male way of knowing that emphasizes separation and individuation, critical analysis, rational debate and detachment, whose mode of discourse is the argument, and is hostile to new ideas (p. 207), connected knowing draws on empathy and intuition, is receptive to new ideas, and seeks collaboration with others.

Women's epistemology of connected knowing is supported by their physiology of connected knowing. Brain research shows that women tend to be less lateralized, less biased in one cerebral hemisphere (Springer and Deutsch, 1993). Women have larger corpora callosa than most men—especially the posterior part of the corpus callosum—which connects the two occipital lobes. Since the corpus callosum is the bridge of neuron axons that connects the two brain hemispheres, women have more integrated cerebral functions as a biological condition.

Connected knowing is also closely related to the humanistic psychology concept of empathy. Carl Rogers, the main theorist on empathy, described empathy as a way of knowing another through connection, through taking his or her frame of reference in order to fully experience that him or her. Humanistic psychotherapists sense their client's

worlds by being open to them, transparent to themselves, and laying "aside all perceptions from the external frame of reference" (Rogers, 1951, p. 29).

2) Social construction of methodologies. Whereas separate knowing is concerned with the discovery of truth, connected knowing is concerned with the discovery of meaning (Lather, 1991; Maguire, 1987; Reinhartz, 1992). While separate knowing uses rational debate to validate truth, connected knowing, as it informs humanistic research methods, looks for validity in the empathetic resonance (Howard, 1991; Hare-Mustin, 1983) and the meaning it awakens in the Other (Buber, quoted by Friedman, 1985, p. 4). Qualitative research is concerned with quality rather than numbers, and is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Feminist research, as a form of qualitative research, is "passionate; it is communal rather than hierarchical" (Smith, 1999, p. 19). It seeks meaningful patterns in experience, not for prediction or control.

3) The Self. In connected knowing, the Self is not experienced in isolation, but is known through interaction with others and "self-insertion" into experience (Elbow, 1973, p. 149). Feminist psychology shares, with humanistic psychology, a view that the self is not a solitary entity, but is known only in relationship. The self, itself, is the instrument in psychotherapy and in research. It is used as an instrument of knowing both in the experience of everyday life, and in participatory research methodologies. In contrast to the more rigid boundaries of separate knowing, its boundaries are flexible and sometimes permeable (Buber, 1947; Rogers, 1961; Perls, 1992; Serlin & Shane, 1999), demonstrating the "paradox of separateness within connection" (Jordan, 1991, p. 69). Finally, not a static object, the self is a "self-in-process", collaboratively created and re-created in the context of relationships (see Polkinghorne, this volume).

4) Dialogical knowing. In connected knowing, the "I" transforms an "It" into a "Thou" (Goldberger et. al, 1996, p. 221). Meaning is found in the intersubjective space between the two, so that the act of interpretation is dialogical (Friedman, 1985, p. 4; Friedman & Sterling, this volume). Dialogical knowing characterizes humanistic theory, therapy and research, and happens between speaker and listener, reader and text (Ricoeur, 1976), researcher and co-researcher (Polkinghorne, 1988).

5) Feeling. In connected knowing, thinking is inseparable from feeling. It is feeling which allows one to feel oneself into the world of the other (Goldberger, 1996, p. 224), to differentiate the particularities of his or her unique experience, in contrast to the abstract, categorical and generalized thinking of separate knowing. Psychological research shows women to be emotionally expressive, while brain research shows that women have greater metabolic activity in the emotional areas of the brain than men (Gur et. al, 1995), are more empathic, and more concerned with communication and relationships.

It could be said that there is a masculine version of humanistic psychology and a feminine version. The masculine version deals mainly with intellectual conceptions, perhaps explaining why Division 32 is male oriented. The more feminine version is concerned with the experiential aspects of relationship and nurturing the development of the person, perhaps explaining the fact that AHP is more female-oriented.

Both masculine and feminine approaches to humanistic psychology are important. The theoretical understandings are important for the foundations of the field; the experiential aspects are important for the implementation of humanistic perspectives in life.

## CONCLUSION

On the one hand, categories of feminist epistemologies are close to humanistic values of holism, subjectivity, and the centrality of the experiencing human being (Bugental, 1976; Maslow, 1962; May, 1953; Yalom, 1980), and "experiential humanism" (Schneider, 1998). Feminist values can bring humanistic psychology back down to earth, to matter and flesh, to connection with other humans, other species and nature. On the other hand, humanistic psychology can give women an opportunity to fully develop their potentials and leadership skills. Their contributions to society need to be valued, such as their sense of relationship, communication, and nurturance.

Humanistic psychologists have a concern for all persons and their basic human rights: their right to be treated as individuals with worth and dignity; the right to the primacy of their experiences; the right to the holistic development of their various talents and capacities, and the rights of society to receive the contributions of all individuals toward the cultural evolution of humankind. This is a fertile ground for the continued development of all toward global and environmental well-being.

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